

# SHIFTS IN THE CYCLE OF EXPERIENCE: MALAY PERCEPTIONS OF MIGRATION

*by Ronald Provencher*

## INTRODUCTION

Kosinski and Prothero, in a recently published symposium volume on geographical studies of internal migration, note without comment the distinction geographers commonly make between the term "mobility," which comprehends all kinds of territorial movement, and the term "migration," which is restricted in meaning to territorial movement that is comparatively distant and permanent (1975:1-4). Further, they review several common typologies of migration and suggest that an adequate typology should be conceived of as a multi-dimensional matrix with cells defined by

time (temporary, permanent); distance (long, short); boundaries crossed (internal, external); areal units involved (between communities, countries, states); decision-making (voluntary, impelled, forced); numbers involved (individual, mass); social organization of migrants (family, clan, individual); political organization of migrations (sponsored, free); causes (economic, non-economic); aims (conservative, innovative). (Kosinski and Prothero, 1975:8-9)

This model of the experience of moving from place to place is linear and teleological, of course, in its emphasis on amount of distance, elapsed time, commitment, organization, and final cause; and it exemplifies the folk models of society elaborated by Western philosophers, which are important to those of us interested in the mysteries of Western cultures, but which are inadequate as *etic* or *nomothetic* (universally applicable) models of behavior in non-Western societies.

I hope to illustrate the inadequacy of this sort of typology for characterizing migration by Malays, and in the end to emphasize the importance of developing models of migration through the traditional inductive methodology of cultural anthropology. The major sources of my descriptions of Malay migration are residential and occupational histories of

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adults of two communities (one urban and one rural) in West Malaysia, which were collected in 1965 and again in 1972.

#### MOVING IN MALAY SOCIETY

Moving from place to place is not an unusual activity in Malay society. Moving out of one's social unit may begin as early as infancy. For example, a male child who resembles his father too closely is a threat to the father's life because his body attracts the "soul substance" (*semangat*) of the father, and the child will be adopted into the household of another relative, an uncle or aunt or grandparent, who lives in another community. Or a child may not get along well with other members of his natal household and be adopted into the household of a relative living in another community. Or his parents' divorce, a frequent occurrence in traditional Malay society, may result in his moving to another community with one of his parents or to the household of another relative. Even the nuclear family may not anchor an individual in one place for very long (see McKinley, 1975).

Traditionally, adolescent males have been encouraged to leave their homes and undertake a long journey or period of wandering called *merantau* to gain experience worthy of an adult male. Best known in the literature on the matrilineal Minangkabau, the *merantau* is an equally strong institution among other subethnic varieties of Malays who have cognatic forms of kinship, and it may more powerfully effect migration in cognatic societies that lack the strong corporate kin groups of the Minangkabau. The *merantau* is given importance through traditional literature and folklore, which provide models of social roles, and through jokes about those who do not undertake it. Further, the *merantau* is but the final act of a long process by which most males are partially alienated from their natal families.

After marriage, which often involves a stay of several months or more in or near the household of his bride, and the birth of the first child, a male is supposed to settle down and stay near home. But many Malay males remain restless all their lives. The most common topic in the coffee shops, which they visit most days of their lives, is travel—the going or returning of someone in the community or personal experiences in distant places. Often adult males with family responsibilities just leave their homes for several weeks or more when an opportunity or excuse for travel suddenly presents itself. Such opportunities often involve the fact that Malays strongly prefer to have companions when they travel. A more or less purposive trip by one may require travel by several others who are merely traveling for the experience of it, or to engage in petty trade.

Female children do not seem to be removed from their natal households as frequently as males. This is related to the greater importance of girls as a source of household labor. Girls are not alienated from their families but rather drawn closer to other family members through service to them. Many female children are removed from their natal households, however, because of divorce or economic hardship of their parents. Adolescent females do not undertake the *merantau*, but they may be moved to the household of a relative to protect their chastity before marriage or to remove them from the focus of gossip about their sexual involvement. Such moves are often fairly distant and occur before the girl's first marriage. She is welcome in the other household, of course, because she is about the right age to make a very significant contribution to household work, and in rural areas, to agricultural work.

The time after marriage and before the oldest female children are able to help is the most difficult for Malay women, and they tend not to travel much during this stage of their lives. But after the oldest daughter is old enough to care for the house and younger children, a woman is free to visit relatives and to travel a bit, especially if her husband is away. Divorces usually stimulate travel by both parties. Many women over sixty years of age have been married five or six times, and each time a husband died or divorced or just left, the woman traveled to another community to visit relatives or friends.

The religious obligation to make a pilgrimage to Mecca, the *haj*, falls to both men and women, and it is often an occasion for further travel or for settling in a new place. Mecca itself is a favorite place for lengthy sojourns, and the Malay community there is exceeded in numbers only by that of the Arabs. Some Malays make the *haj* and remain in Mecca for a decade or more, finding places in the local economy after they have fulfilled their religious obligation. Often they have brought their families with them. Others begin their return by way of Africa or India and are similarly delayed for many years.

Other reasons for travel by adults of both sexes include a value placed on returning to one's natal community at the end of life, a need to seek healers when one is suffering a lingering illness, a right to shelter and support by one's children (especially daughters), and a desire to be with one's closest relatives when they are ill or otherwise in serious distress.

These kinds of moving from place to place are entirely traditional and normative in Malay life. Each involves a particular portion of a normal person's life cycle or *sejarah hidup* (literally, "life history," except that *sejarah* is more concerned with dramatic settings or "times" such as *masa* or with dramatic scenes or "hours" such as *jam* rather than with historical passage of time). None of these kinds of moving implies a permanent commitment to residence in a distant place. The same is true

of external historical and economic forces that have accompanied large-scale migration of Malays. And perhaps it is too obvious to add that migration is more a matter of not returning than it is a matter of leaving in the first place.

#### EXTERNAL FORCES AND LARGE-SCALE MIGRATION

Large-scale migrations of Malays have been common since the beginning of their recorded history. Among the largest of early migrations may have been the movement of Minangkabaus and Palembang Malays from Sumatra into the western and southern states of the Malay peninsula beginning in the thirteenth or fourteenth century. External forces of that time may have included the fall of the empire of Srivijaya, which was centered in Sumatra, the imperialism of the new Javanese empire of Majapahit, the temporary decline of the Thai empire of Sukhotai, and the founding of a new Malay empire centered in Melaka (see Wolters, 1970). This migration continued until the early sixteenth century when it was at least temporarily interrupted by the Portuguese conquest of Melaka in 1511, immediately after which there may have been a major counterstream of migration to Sumatra.

There was a resurgence of migration from the Indonesian islands into the Malay peninsula during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries as the Dutch tightened their monopoly on trade in the Indonesian area, and as Europeans became increasingly involved in the tin trade. But this and the earlier period of migration from Sumatra were as a drop in a large bucket compared to migration in the first three decades of the twentieth century, which was directly related to the orderliness and restraint of British colonial rule in Malaya as compared to Dutch rule in the Indonesian islands. The boom in the rubber industry of Malaya was another very important factor in this great migration. It has been estimated (conservatively) that about eighty per cent of the Malays in the western and southern states of the Malay peninsula are to be accounted for by this migration period (Silcock, 1963). But many returned to Indonesia during this period, too.

Another migration of Malays, from towns and cities into the countryside, occurred during the Japanese occupation of Malaya during World War II. Some Malays migrated to Sumatra at the same time and for similar reasons: to avoid the military and to find food. Some stayed the rest of their lives in such places as they found. Others returned to their homes in towns and cities when the British returned. Still others born in rural areas came into towns and cities, too. In 1948 the flow of Malays into urban areas was enhanced by the outbreak of civil war, which was waged mostly in rural areas. Even aboriginal Malays, such as the

Temuans, were settled in towns to keep them from being exploited by the insurgents. A Temuan community near the rural Malay community that I studied was resettled in town by the government and was kept there for twelve years (several years beyond the official ending of the civil war, just to make sure). When they were again allowed to return to the forested hills, every one of them did so, setting aside the Malay customs they had learned in those years and beginning their Temuan ways anew.

Other territorial movements have been encouraged in recent years by government programs to improve housing and educational opportunities for Malays in urban areas, and by programs to improve old agricultural lands and provide new agricultural lands for Malays. Rural people have been drawn to cities, townspeople have moved to the larger cities, and many landless people from rural and urban areas have pioneered newly opened agricultural lands. But even migrants involved in these governmental schemes are not often aware of making a decision to move permanently. Most are simply aware of short term advantages that do not necessarily involve permanent migration; if they are aware of the permanent implications of government programs they are frequently unhappy. One of the most common complaints of those involved in land development schemes is that the government makes it almost impossible to dispose of such land at a personal profit, and many "rent" their lands and houses to others while they themselves work other lands or reside in other houses. But in the long run these new governmental programs will effect a profound migration of Malays into urban areas. Even the land development schemes will contribute and have contributed through the reduction of labor requirements and increase in field size that accompany the use of machines and more efficient labor techniques, and through the release from tenancy of many of the poorer peasants in older agricultural settlements. They will be able to afford better education for their children, who will thereby be better able to remain in cities that they come to in their travels. Relief from work in the fields will be especially noticed by young females, who in the past have been most involved in wet-rice growing and rubber-tapping as well as child-tending and house-cleaning. It is easy to imagine that part of the recent influx of young unmarried females into the cities is related to a declining importance of female labor in rural areas. Other factors include better education for girls and expansion of low-paying jobs in government and industry.

#### MIGRATION: THE CHOICES OF RETURNING OR NOT

Government statistics have always underrated the amount of Malay migration that occurs. A major reason for this is that most Malays in strange places have every intention of returning to their native places, and

their relatives and friends have the same expectation for them. Out of place Malays are rarely counted. So official statistics on migration based on number of households and average number of persons per household are useless except in the sense of noting the places where Malays have piled up or thinned out. Such estimates show that many of the older rural settlements are losing population while urban communities are gaining. The older rural settlements are in effect the main sources of population for new agricultural settlements and for urban growth. Of the two communities I studied, the rural community lost about 6% of its population between 1965 and 1972, and the urban community gained almost 40% in population. The lack of balance here does not relate to differences in community size, which was about the same in 1965, but rather to the general situation in which there are many more old rural communities than there are new agricultural communities and urban communities.

Shifts in the density of different Malay communities result from individuals making decisions about where and when traditional kinds of moving will occur, rather than whether or not to migrate. For example, male adolescents in all communities of Malays will almost all want to embark on the *merantau*. The questions are "where shall I go first?" and "when?" and "how will I manage?" One basis of choice about where to start is the value of likely experiences and opportunities. Cities have always ranked high as valued places of adventure, and if not cities then at least distant places. The first choice even of town or city boys is another urban place. But the problem is that urban living is expensive. Even when one stays with relatives and friends—and this is an important element in choosing the particular urban place—one must contribute something. Some urban boys who have good jobs with vacation time use that time for *merantau*. Others move to other urban places and try to find jobs there. But in any case the *merantau* is most difficult for rural boys. They must earn a stake before beginning their journeys. When prices for rubber latex are high relative to the cost of living in cities, more young men are present in large cities because one can quickly earn money from tapping rubber for a stake large enough to remain in the city, having experiences and searching for an urban job to prolong the *merantau*. When prices for latex are relatively low, young men generally spend less time in the cities and more time trying to earn a stake. In the years between 1965 and 1972 the price of latex rose as the cost of renting quarters in the city fell (because of the rapid expansion of private housing through government loans to owners in the urban community). Many young men who visited the urban community on their *merantau* were able to extend their visits, not only because of relatively low rent, but also because of expanding job opportunities for Malays as a result of government programs. They remained in the urban community and be-



gan families. By 1972, the relative price of latex fell and temporarily fewer young men could stay very long in the urban community. There were more young bachelors in the rural community than in 1965 and the good years up to 1972. Young rural bachelors still visited the city, but only for brief periods of several days at a time. They were not "piling up" in the city.

In 1965, there was as much a scarcity of adolescent and young unmarried adult females in the urban community as there was a surplus of young unmarried bachelors. This was especially the case with regard to renter households. There was only one bachelorette for every twenty-two bachelor renters. By "bachelorette" I mean a single girl living in a single generation household alone, with other girls, or with male siblings. Between 1965 and 1972 the incidence of unmarried female renters grew from about 3 per 1000 population to about 150 per 1000 population. In 1965, the tendency had been for renter families to have fewer adolescent females as members than did owner families or rural families. That, too, had changed by 1972, when urban renter and owner families and rural families had approximately the same proportions of adolescent females. Formerly, adolescent and young unmarried females were a liability in the urban setting. They usually could not find jobs except as dance hall girls or prostitutes. There was a somewhat greater chance that urban maidens would lose their virginity and have difficulty finding a proper first husband. And so they were often sent off to live with rural relatives until they married. They were very useful in the rural setting, keeping house and tending small children while the adult women worked in the rice fields and tapped rubber. Females had little opportunity for productive work in the cities, but they comprised a major portion of the work force in rural areas.

The increase in numbers of young unmarried women in the urban community is harder to explain in traditional terms of moving than the fluctuations in numbers of young men in the city. First of all, the young unmarried women live together in pairs or threes or fours, or they live with their brothers. Only the latter are properly chaperoned according to traditional ideals, and urban landlords could refuse to be involved with the others, but in fact young women are preferred tenants because they behave well and pay their rent on time. They have given the owners no cause to think of them as immoral.

In a sense they are in the same position as were the working daughters of urban families in the 1960s, who were not held to such a tight leash as their unemployed sisters, and who even had the right to object to their parents' choice for their first husband. Many of the urban migrants of the 1970s were born to town Malays rather than to rural Malays. In other instances their parents had fled the rural areas during the civil war

and neither returned themselves nor sent their daughters, for chastity's sake, to rural relatives.

Those few who grew up in rural communities at least attended school in town. All received educations appropriate for urban work. Most reported that they received their job offers through formal application and an interview before they moved to the urban community. Only a few came to the city first, stayed with relatives, and then sought employment. The government policy of giving more urban jobs to Malays through expansion of the establishment lists and setting of Malay quotas for private businesses came at the right time for them (beginning in 1970) to take advantage of their schooling.

These young women send some portion of their salaries to their parents, an extension of the traditional obligation of a daughter to support her parents in their old age. Perhaps in exchange their parents complain less to them about their untraditional life style. But in any case these young unmarried Malay women living by themselves in cities are sowing the seeds of a revolutionary change in Malay values and Malay social organization. They are the first products of Malay communities that were urbanized during the civil war, and one supposes that many more like them will follow. In traditional Malay society it has been the women who have been most conservative guardians of tradition and religious belief. What will these independent young women teach their children? Will their sons undertake the traditional *merantau*? Will their daughters be even more able than in the past to move and to remain in places of their own choice?

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper is an incomplete report in the sense of not thoroughly discussing all that has been touched upon in passing. I have not figured it all out yet. But it shows the greater understanding that comes from approaching the study of migration in Malay society through Malay ideas about moving rather than through Western folk models of mobility and migration. A concern with the illustrative model of types of migration that was drawn from Kosinski and Prothero (1975) would have diverted attention from the contrast between the essentially traditional quality of young male movement into cities and the modernizing character of young female movement into cities, and it would have ignored the revolutionary potential of the latter.



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